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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0245
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0335

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000629

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MR](#)
SUBJECT: THE MAYOR OF TIDJIKJA

Classified By: CDA Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The anti-coup mayor of Tidjikja, the isolated capital of Tagant Province, says his city council increasingly against the coup despite a "culture of submission." He notes continued pressure on him as an anti-coup mayor. He doubts the seriousness of the recent arrest of "AQIM elements" in his town but noted the pressures of radicalism in his own family.

¶2. (C) Charge met October 26 with the anti-coup mayor of Tidjikja, Mohamed Ould Biha. Biha was pointed out earlier in the week by Abdallahi "Foreign Minister" Mohamed Ould Maouloud as one of the more courageous mayors against the coup. Ould Biha presented himself as a defender of the democratic progress Mauritania had made though not necessarily a strong supporter of Abdallahi as an individual. Saying he was aware of the military support funneled into Abdallahi's campaign before the elections, he said, "I voted for him in the first and second round as the person most likely to complete the political transition to democracy." He saw Abdallahi's mandate as "the final five years of democratic transition away from military rule" rather than the completion of that transition. He saw Abdallahi's main rival, Ahmed Ould Daddah, as being too incendiary for the military. He did not believe the transition would be allowed to go forward by the military if Ould Daddah had won. He saw Abdallahi has having never managed to gain control over the military, "he was their prisoner in the Presidential Palace, and now he's their prisoner in jail." Despite his qualms about Abdallahi before and after his election, Ould Biha said any acceptance of the coup was a step backward.

¶3. (C) Ould Biha said soon after the coup his City Council had derided him for opposing the central authority of the new government. He said he pointed at the old guard who had served forever at city hall. He asked, "If Mohamed here were to jab his gun in my neck and lock me up in the closet and then call you all in and, in his dusty old uniform, say he is now the new mayor, would you accept him?" When they all said "no," he said that was what Aziz was doing only worse because he was defying the universal suffrage that had put Abdallahi into office. Ould Biha said his Council has come around, overcoming what he termed a "culture of submission" that always respects power.

¶4. (C) Ould Biha said he has twice been called into the office of the intelligence head in Tidjikja, a friend from high school. The first visit was friendly, along the lines of "I would hate to see you on the wrong side of this" while the second visit was more menacing. He said what little

central government the city got before the coup had dried up and was very pleased when Charge asked if he had a small (\$10-20,000) project our CMSE team could undertake as part of our efforts to provide visible, if modest, support to anti-coup mayors. Charge said we would try to get a team to visit his isolated capital in the next month, although we saw the possibility the junta would block it since Prime Minister Waghef is under house arrest in a nearby village.

15. (C) Charge asked Ould Biha about reports that several suspected AQIM members had been arrested in his town the week earlier. He said he had his doubts about the case. He noted that two teens belonging to a family that had moved to Tidjikja from Chinguetti a decade ago (not from the local clan so still considered "outsiders") had taken to going target shooting every Friday. They were sometimes in trouble with authorities but he was unsure they were terrorists. He noted that the fact dynamite was found in their house is not that unusual since it is readily available locally and used to clear boulders in the mountainous area. He said 20 other associates of the two teens were rounded up and questioned but all but two were quickly released. Still unclear of all the particulars he said, "These kids were doing stuff I did all the time when I was young, but in the present climate that makes one suspicious."

16. (C) Ould Biha was quick not to dismiss the terrorist threat. He noted centuries-old smuggling routes pass near Tidjikja that are still used by cigarette smugglers and could easily be used by terrorists as well. Pointing on a map to the empty space between Tidjikja and the Malian border, he

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saw that his town could be as easily targeted by AQIM elements as has had been Tourine in September or El Ghallouwiya in December 2007. Looking to internal radicalism, he saw Mauritania culture being changed. The long drought had caused tremendous internal migration, turning Mauritania in 40 years from a country of nomads to one of city-dwellers. Families were disrupted as youth went to Nouakchott and other areas looking for work. Traditional tribal ties are breaking down -- something both good for national unity but bad for short-term social order. Referring to the main shooter in the December 24 killing of French tourists, a young man from a respectable Nouakchott family, Ould Biha spoke of his own nephew. His nephew had done well in school but was getting wild. Smoking and staying out all night. Recently he had started going to mosque to straighten himself out and had approached his uncle last month to say he was going to a mahadra near the Malian border to "find true Islam." Ould Biha saw this immediately as Al Qaeda recruitment and told his nephew he would pay for religious study at home, but that the extremists would teach him "a false Islam." The nephew is settled for now, but Ould Biha remains wary of the appeal of radicalism on disaffected youth. A successful military coup, he said, "will give them even less to believe in and ultimately will breed terrorism."

HANKINS